

Introduction

The term “Bedouin” defines groups of traditionally pastoral nomadic desert-dwelling Muslim Arabs. Since the 1950s, Bedouin in Israel have undergone a rapid process of sedentarization (mostly into agriculture), modernization and urbanization. As of 2016, approximately 240,000 Bedouin live in the Negev, accounting for approximately one third of the population in the region.¹

Generally speaking, Negev Bedouin are part of Israel’s Arab-Muslim minority and share their interests and concerns. At the same time, with a unique history and culture, they constitute a subgroup with a distinct set of challenges and changes. Today there are three major issues affecting Bedouin society: (i) large economic gaps and economic development efforts, (ii) an ongoing land dispute with the state, and (iii) internal dilemmas around modernization, culture change and community development.

(i) Economic Development

Negev Bedouin are by far Israel’s most disadvantaged community. Per capita income is 50% that of the rest of Arab society in Israel, and 22% of the national average. Unemployment and poverty rates are the highest in Israel, with only 24% of Bedouin women and 56% of men employed, and more than 55% of the Bedouin population living in poverty. A young community with 60% of the population below the age of 19, close to 70% of Bedouin children are defined as poor.

On a municipal level, all Negev Bedouin towns are rated lowest on Israel’s national socio-economic rankings. Bedouin municipalities generally have an under-supply of public infrastructure (i.e. schools, roads, public transportation) and few commercial or industrial zones for economic activity. The weak economic status and lack of services have contributed to significant gaps in educational achievements and integration into the labor market, as well as to social problems such as higher than average crime rates, internal violence and drug use.

Over the past decade, the Government of Israel has made closing socio-economic gaps an economic and regional priority, passing consecutive multiyear economic development plans for Bedouin society. In 2011, the first plan allocated NIS 1.26 billion over five years, and the second, covering years 2017-2021, allocated NIS 3 billion. Both plans’ funding has been going towards boosting employment, informal education, access to higher education, social services and better local governance (see the [Task Force Brief on this recent Development Plan.](#)) The recent plan focuses in particular on strengthening Bedouin municipal bodies as key levers of change. This plan also includes incentives urging Bedouins to move from “unrecognized” communities to the “recognized” towns and villages—described in detail in the next section—underscoring the complexity of pursuing economic development efforts in parallel with an ongoing land dispute.

¹ Israel also has 70,000 Bedouin live in the Galilee and around 10,000 in central Israel, but they are considered different sub-groups with differing lifestyles, context and set of challenges, and are not covered by this brief.

(ii) Land Dispute with the State

At the establishment of the state, around 12,000 Bedouin lived in the Negev. Under Israel's Military Administration of Arab citizens (which lasted from 1948 to 1966), Bedouin were compelled to resettle within the "Sayeg Area" (between Beer Sheva, Dimona and Arad). In the 1970s and 80s, seven towns were created for Bedouins in the Negev: Kseifeh, Laqiya, Hura, Tel-Sheva, Segev Shalom, Ar'ara and Rahat—which became the first Bedouin city and currently has approximately 65,000 residents (recently becoming the second largest Arab city in Israel, after Nazareth).

Today, 60% of Negev Bedouin live in these municipalities and villages constructed by the state. Bedouin villages and communities outside of these towns are not officially recognized by the state ("unrecognized villages") and do not receive state services nor are connected to basic infrastructure such as water, electricity and roads. In the early 2000s, 11 of these unrecognized Bedouin villages were officially recognized and turned into two municipal regions (Neve Midbar and Al Qassum). Roughly 30 unrecognized villages and communities remain, home to an estimated 40% of the Negev Bedouin population, roughly 100,000 people.

According to Israeli property ownership law, Bedouin ownership claimants in these unrecognized villages do not have rights to the land, as they are unable to provide the modern documentation the courts require (basing their claims on traditional agreements). Yet, Bedouin families are reluctant to relocate and lose what they consider their land, preferring to live in under-served villages lacking basic amenities and subject to demolition by state authorities until an acceptable resolution is achieved (more than 1,100 homes were demolished in 2016).

For more than 15 years, the government has been making efforts to resolve this conflict and regulate Bedouin settlement in the Negev via a negotiation or listening process that would be formalized in legislation. But achieving an acceptable plan has proven elusive. When the plan informally known as the Begin-Praver Plan passed a first Knesset vote in June 2013, it was met with heated protest, resulting in a freeze of the legislation.. The bill was criticized by Bedouin and civil rights organizations who claimed it violates Bedouin rights, and from right wing organizations that claimed it is too lenient and gives Bedouins too much land. (See the [Task Force Legislative Update on this plan.](#))

In the absence of legislation or an overarching state-sponsored policy, ongoing demolitions on the one hand and parallel efforts to integrate housing solutions and land regulation into economic development plans, the land-dispute continues to be one of the highest points of contention between Bedouin community and the state (see the Task Force's brief on [House Demolitions and Um El Hiran](#) in January 2017).

(iii) Tradition vs. Culture Change

In recent years, Bedouin society has been undergoing rapid internal processes of change as a result of enhanced education, economic development and participation in wider Israel society and indeed a more globalized world. Notwithstanding the vast socio-economic gaps overall, there are a growing number of Bedouin academics, businessmen, civil society leaders and professionals bringing international exposure and experience back into the society. Traditional Bedouin society

is patriarchal, conservative and maintains at times strict separation of genders, especially in the public sphere. Recent advances have been shifting traditional power and influence structures, (especially among the younger generation), reshaping cultural boundaries, and affecting Bedouin women perhaps most of all.

A few examples: (i) whereas in 1997 there were no Bedouin women studying at Beer Sheva-based Ben Gurion University, today over 60% of the 350 Bedouin students at the university are women. (ii) Only two decades ago, there was just one Bedouin (male) doctor in the Negev and the first Bedouin woman completed her medical studies in 2006. Today more than 400 Bedouin doctors work throughout the Negev, mainly at Beer Sheva-based Soroka Hospital. (iii) While the majority of Bedouin women continues to be limited by traditional culture—a number of [Bedouin women's organizations](#) have been established over the past two decades that are working to empower women and girls both within traditional cultural frameworks, and by expanding opportunities. They are promoting literacy among older women, access to higher education for girls, and providing occupational training, Hebrew skills and microbusinesses opportunities so that women can become more independent, generate their own incomes and go out to work.

In some cases, however, traditional practices continue despite the growing influence of development processes. For example, polygamy was accepted and prevalent in Bedouin society in previous centuries, but is illegal according to Israeli law since 1977, punishable by up to five years in prison. This law, however, is rarely upheld in practice. According to government figures, around a third of Bedouin men in the Negev today are thought to have multiple wives, with wide-ranging social, legal and economic consequences.

Polygamy is an issue area that underscores the fine line many Bedouins feel they are walking between tradition and modernity. While Bedouin women organizations have been working to combat polygamy, on the one hand, they are also cautious about government intervention and enforcement—such as a January 2017 [special resolution](#) to provide welfare services to women and children in polygamous families, which is seen as encroaching on wider Bedouin rights and cultural expression. Bedouin women's organizations welcomed the support for families but expressed their suspicion of the government's broader motives.